

What is it like to run a large supermarket?

Jill Insley finds out

A

You can't beat really good service. I've been shopping in the Thamesmead branch of supermarket chain Morrisons, in south-east London, and I've experienced at first hand, the store's latest maxim for improving the shopping experience – help, offer, thank. This involves identifying customers who might need help, greeting them, asking what they need, providing it, thanking them and leaving them in peace. If they don't look like they want help, they'll be left alone. But if they're standing looking lost and perplexed, a member of staff will approach them. Staff are expected to be friendly to everyone. My checkout assistant has certainly said something to amuse the woman in front of me, she's smiling as she leaves. Adrian Perriss, manager of the branch, has discussed the approach with each of his 387 staff. He says it's about recognising that someone needs help, not being a nuisance to them. When he's in another store, he's irritated by someone saying, 'Can I help you?' when he's only just walked in to have a quick look at the products.

B

How anyone can be friendly and enthusiastic when they start work at dawn beats me. The store opens at 7 am, Monday to Saturday, meaning that some staff, including Perriss, have to be here at 6 am to make sure it's clean, safe and stocked up for the morning rush. Sometimes he walks in at 6 am and thinks they're never going to be ready on time – but they always are. There's so much going on overnight – 20 people working on unloading three enormous trailers full of groceries.

C

Perriss has worked in supermarkets since 1982, when he became a trolley boy on a weekly salary of £76. 'It was less money than my previous job, but I loved it. It was different and diverse. I was doing trolleys, portering, bread, cakes, dairy and general maintenance.' After a period in the produce department, looking after the fruit and vegetables, he was made produce manager, then assistant store manager, before reaching the top job in 1998. This involved intensive training and assessment through the company's future store manager programme, learning how to analyse and prioritise sales, wastage, recruitment and many other issues. Perriss' first stop as store manager was at a store which was closed soon afterwards – though he was not to blame.